

FIRST IMPRESSIONS 21ST SUNDAY -C-

Isaiah 66: 18-21 Psalm 117 Hebrews 12: 5-7, 11-13 Luke 13: 22-30

By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

Have we run into a “gospel exception” in today’s passage from Luke? If there is any one motif throughout all the scriptures, the Hebrew as well as the Christian texts, then it is this: God’s love for us is a gift, unearned by anything we can do. Add this too: God acts graciously on our behalf, and we can’t “make” or “persuade” God to do good for us, God just does so. It is God’s nature, and we are the fortunate recipients of it.

But today’s gospel seems to break the usual gospel mold as Jesus advises someone, “Strive to enter through the narrow gate, for many, I tell you, will attempt to enter but will not be strong enough.” Is that what it’s all about: working hard to push our way into a restricted place that “many” won’t be able to enter? Sounds like a rugby match—push, shove and scramble and, with luck, you’ll be able to “enter.” But do it in a hurry because once the doors are locked, you’ll be stuck outside knocking and begging to be admitted.

One thing is for sure. Jesus’ words should shake anyone out of his/her complacency or lackadaisical discipleship. Even those who accompanied Jesus on the road and ate and drank with him, his own table companions, will not have a free pass. Jesus’ words cause us, at this eucharistic table today, to ponder. We have been given the gift of new life and if we are true table companions of the Lord, then our lives need to reflect our proximity to him. We should have learned from him to manifest God’s compassion in daily little ways and in the larger patterns of our lives. Just invoking the Lord’s name at prayer today is not enough.

Jesus’ followers might have been able to boast they sat up close with him at table (“We ate and drank in your company, and you taught in our streets....”), but it will be by their actions that they will show they had accepted him and his ways into their lives. Through Jesus, entrance into the reign of God was given as a gift. To show they had accepted the gift they would have to live changed lives, otherwise Jesus would not recognize them, no matter how devoutly they called him “Lord,” or begged to be let into his dwelling place.

I am writing this in an over-packed airport on a day when weather has cancelled most flights. I am hoping to catch the next one home, four hours from now. In previous years all this time in the airport has sometimes been the occasion for a stranger to come up and ask if I have been saved. Similar missionary types have interrupted more than one dinner hour by a ring at the front door and a question, “Have you been saved?” I can admire such zeal even though their way of preaching the gospel is different from my own. Nevertheless, I have always sensed a bit of smugness in their question. It sounds like they think they have made it but are not so sure about the rest of us.

That’s how I hear the questioner in today’s gospel. The person, asking Jesus about the “few” who would be saved, sounds like he or she feels confident that they are among the few. Jesus’ response certainly would have shaken the seeming-secure ground on which they thought they stood. Which side do you think this person believes he or she is on? In Jesus’ day there were groups like the Pharisees and the Essenes who thought of themselves specially chosen by God. They separated themselves from the rest of people so they wouldn’t be “tainted” by the huge mass of sinners around them. They wanted to be religiously pure and ready for the arrival of the messiah. It’s ironic that when the messiah did come, he was found right in the midst of the very people they were shunning!

I can’t imagine the smug person who asked Jesus the question about the saved, ever giving a serious look into his or her life. You get the feeling that they don’t think they need to—others did. We must acknowledge the shadow side of our own lives and forget about judging others. We may be religious people, but how inclusive are we of others who have different religious perspectives? Are we kind and generous to those in need, even if they are outside our own religious circle? Do we work with others, believers and atheists, for the well-being of our neighborhood, environment and the needy of the world? Or do we think that God’s will is only to be found in our own church’s efforts and outreach?

What must have surprised those who thought they would get into the “master’s house” was that they were rejected. They got there too late. Were they too casual about the invitation? Did they put off their response because, initially, it would have meant changes in their lives? What would astound them in Jesus’ imagery is that those they would have considered outsiders, “from the east and the west and

from the north and south,” did get in to be at the “table in the kingdom of God.” With God things aren’t as neat and fixed as we would like them; not when the insiders become the outsiders and the outsiders the insiders!

The question is about numbers and Jesus brushes it aside. He is not counting disciples and judging the success of his mission by the numbers following him. In fact, he is heading for Jerusalem and once events unfold there he could have counted his loyal followers on one hand. When I was a boy we were told that salvation was pretty much guaranteed if you were a Catholic. Which left out quite a few Protestants, Jews, Muslims and non-believers of good will. There are still people today who hold that their way to salvation is the only way. Some proselytize their beliefs, but others, more fanatical, do some pretty extreme things to promote their “one, true God.”

While I find great riches, support and challenge in my Catholic faith, and would find it very difficult to leave it behind, I don’t, for one moment, believe that my faith is the only one for all people. I know from years of ministry and life in general, that God works in many other traditions and individuals. We can’t restrict God’s grace to too narrow a channel. Not if we have been attentive to the readings we have been hearing week after week from Luke’s gospel. Luke reveals over and over how inclusive Jesus was. The most surprising people responded to Jesus’ message, people his disciples must have, at first, considered unworthy. They must have also considered Jesus too free with his gift of mercy; too welcoming to his table those who would never have been considered guests in the homes of the religious and social elite. If we want to find ourselves at “the table in the kingdom of God” then we had better get to know now those others Jesus says will also be there, those who have come from the four corners of the world.

The prophet Isaiah today challenges his contemporaries the way Jesus did the people of his time. The prophet’s words break through any exclusivity or sense of singular privilege the Jewish people may have felt because of their status as “the chosen people.” Isaiah says God’s call isn’t meant for just a few, but that all people shall come to offer themselves to God.

The prophet pictures a long line of people coming “on horses and in chariots, in carts upon mules and dromedaries to Jerusalem....just at the Israelites bring their offerings to the house of the Lord....” All these people aren’t just coming to

Jerusalem; they come to the temple to offer gifts—just as faithful Jews did. Indeed, the prophet tells us, God will even take from among them priests and Levites. What was a closed system of priestly families, now has been opened to foreigners. There is no religious act or obligatory service that earns this honor but is given by a gracious God who spoke through Isaiah and Jesus; who opens the doors and invites to the banquet those who could never get in on their own.

So, in the end, salvation, entrance to the reign of God, comes down to a gift. But it is a gift that has an urgency about it and requires a decisive response on our part. If we realize how loving God has been to us, then we had better reflect that love towards others. If we have come to know God's forgiveness, then we had better let go of the debts we hold against others. If we have heard the free invitation to the reign of God and have experienced God's open-door policy to us, then we had better unlock our own hearts to those whom our world looks upon as outsiders and unworthy.

When it comes right down to it the question put to Jesus, "Lord, will only a few people be saved?" is a scary one. After all, who deserves to be saved? What could we do on our own to make ourselves worthy to sit at the table in the kingdom of God? Jesus offers us the gift of life and we enter this new life through him, the narrow gate. But it is a gate wide enough to admit many—many more than small-minded people could ever imagine.

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER

Richard Leonard, SJ. **PREACHING TO THE CONVERTED: ON SUNDAYS AND FEAST DAYS THROUGHOUT THE YEAR** (New York: Paulist Press, 2006) ISBN 978-0-8091-4416-7. Paper, \$24.95

These are brief story-based reflections on the Sunday and feast day readings in the Catholic lectionary. Many preachers say they are constantly looking for good stories and illustrations for their preachings and this book will help.

QUOTABLE

The Second Vatican Council...reflected on the church's experience of working side by side with religious people and secular humanists throughout the world who were as committed as we are to justice, love and freedom. In the "Declaration on the

Relationship of the Church to non-Christian Religions,” the bishops thought more generously about how God has a relationship with all people who in turn relate to God, even if they do not name it in the same way we are able to. The council did not draw back from believing that Jesus is the way to the Father, but it also affirmed that God can work in an infinite number of ways to assist people to salvation. It is church teaching now that our relationship to all people who share the best of our values must be characterized by acceptance, collaboration, dialogue and charity.

—Richard Leonard, SJ., page 329.

JUSTICE NOTES

“...People will come ... and will recline at table in the kingdom of God. (Luke 13:30)

The Gospel is full of examples of what is sometimes called the “Table Fellowship” of Jesus. In their Pastoral Reflection, *A Place at the Table*, our US Catholic Bishops challenge us to make room at our tables for all our brothers and sisters.

“A table is where people come together for food. For many, there is not enough food and, in some cases, no table at all.

A table is where people meet to make decisions—in neighborhoods, nations, and the global community. ***Many people have no place at the table.*** Their voices and needs are ignored or dismissed.

In our world and nation, many of our sisters and brothers live in poverty. The causes are complex, but the results are clear. They cannot find decent work, feed their families, educate their children, secure health care, or find adequate housing. Millions of families cannot live in dignity because they lack the conditions worthy of human life. Our faith teaches us that poor people are not issues or problems but sisters and brothers in God's one human family.” (*A Place at the Table: A Pastoral Reflection of the U.S. Catholic Bishops Nov. 2002*)

Did you know?

- More than half of the world's population lives on less than two dollars a day.
- In the United States, thirty-four million people live below the official

poverty line (i.e., \$17,960 for a family of four). If all these people lived in one state, its population would be larger than the combined current populations of Colorado, Utah, Wyoming, Nevada, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Nebraska, South Dakota, North Dakota, Idaho, Iowa, and Arizona.

What Can I do?

- “In our families, we can make time to serve those in need and to become involved in efforts that promote justice.
- As workers, owners, and managers, Catholics should contribute to a workplace that is safe and respectful, where workers have a voice and can earn enough to support themselves and their families.
- As consumers and as investors, we can support businesses that contribute to the common good, treat workers fairly, and do not exploit the poor and vulnerable.
- As consumers, we can also live more simply so that there might be enough at the table for all.

(Submitted by Anne and Bill Werdel, from the parish bulletin of Sacred Heart Cathedral, Raleigh, NC)

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

"It is time to abandon the death penalty -- not just because of what it does to those who are executed, but because of how it diminishes all of us... We ask all Catholics--pastors, catechists, educators and parishioners -- to join us in rethinking this difficult issue and committing ourselves to pursuing justice without vengeance. With our Holy Father, we seek to build a society so committed to human life that it will not sanction the killing of any human person.

-----("Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on

Crime and Criminal Justice," U.S. Catholic Bishops, Nov. 2000,)

Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I am posting in this space several inmates' names and locations. I invite you to write a postcard to one or more of them to let them know that: we have not forgotten them; are praying for them and their families; or, whatever personal encouragement you might like to give them. If you like, tell them you heard about them through North Carolina's, "People of Faith Against the Death Penalty."

Thanks, Jude Siciliano, OP

Please write to:.....

- William Anthony #0654093 (On death row since 6/3/99)
- James Jaynes #0206197 (6/4/99)
- James Morgan ##0291861 (7/8/99)

---Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, NC 27606